

# Missouri National Recreational River



By Jay Gilbertson, East Dakota Water Development District

The Missouri River currently serves as the primary water source for numerous public water suppliers in South Dakota, including but not limited to, WEB Water Development Association, Mid-Dakota Rural Water System, West River/Lyman-Jones Rural Water System and Lower Brule Rural Water Supply System. It also provides electrical power generation at several hydroelectric dams along its course, and supports a range of recreational activities like boating and fishing. However, many people might not know that it also includes a National Park Service facility, the Missouri National Recreational River.

In 1968, the United States Congress passed the Wild and Scenic Rivers Act. The act declared it to be the policy of the United States "that certain selected rivers of the Nation, which with their immediate environments, possess outstanding remarkable scenic, recreational, geologic, fish and wildlife, historic, cultural, or other similar values, shall be preserved in free-flowing condition, and that they and their immediate environments shall be protected for the benefit and enjoyment of present and future generations."

The Missouri National Recreational River (MNRR) is located on the border between Nebraska and South Dakota. The designation was first applied in 1978 to a 59-mile section of the Missouri

River between Gavins Point Dam near Yankton and Ponca State Park in Nebraska, which is just south of Elk Point. In 1991, an additional 39-mile section between the Fort Randall Dam and the headwaters of Lewis and Clark Lake (near Niobrara, Nebraska) was added to the MNRR. These two stretches of the Missouri River are the only parts of the river between Montana and the mouth of the Missouri that remains free flowing, that is, it is not either dammed or channelized. The last (lower) 20 miles of the Niobrara River and 6 miles of Verdigre Creek in Nebraska were also added to the MNRR in 1991.



The MNRR is managed by the National Park Service (NPS), which has administrative offices in Yankton. Although authorized for up to 40,000 acres, the MNRR formally consists of only about 1,200 acres. Goat Island, which straddles the border between South Dakota and Nebraska, constitutes over two-thirds of this amount. The vast majority of the facilities and resources that are within the area are owned and managed by other local, state and federal entities, with each working cooperatively to protect and preserve various aspects of the area. The MNRR does operate a mobile interpretive center, which can often be found at events large and small along the river.

As called for in the Act, a broad range of outstanding remarkable values are found within the MNRR. The river has served as a principle highway and commerce route for as long as people have

been in the area, including numerous indigenous tribes and early European Americans. Lewis and Clark passed through the area on their epic journey of exploration, and several features they observed remain today. A recently "discovered" relic from the past are remnants of the steamship North Alabama, which sank after running into a snag in the river channel on October 27th, 1870. During periods of low water, portions of the ship, along with what is believed to be the responsible snag, are visible just off the edge of Goat Island.

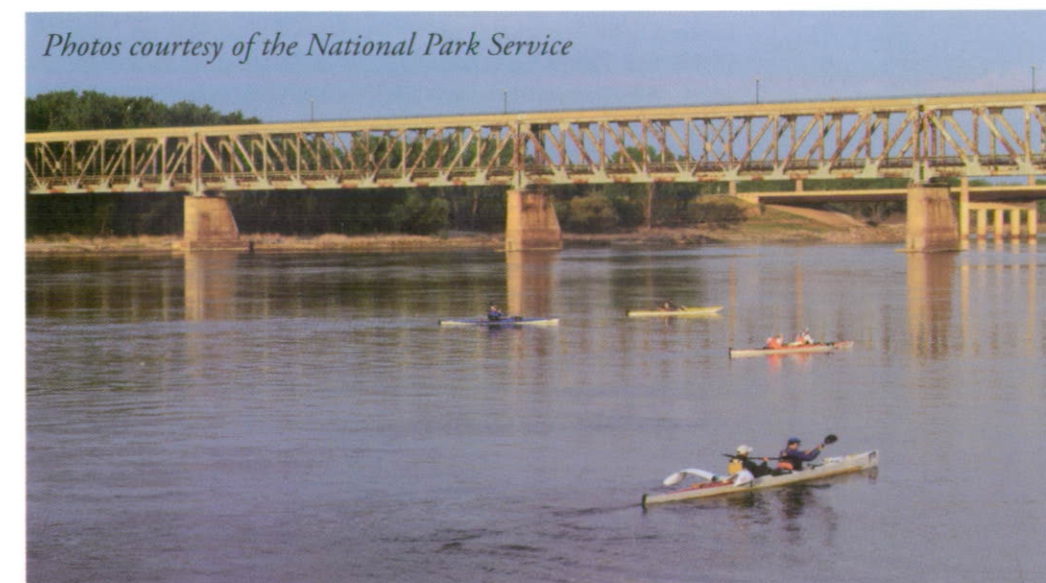
Within the MNRR there are also numerous opportunities to observe and interact with a range of ecosystems, including stretches of largely undeveloped and wild riparian areas. It provides wintering, nesting and migratory stopover habitat for bald eagles and a wide variety of migratory birds. Shifting sand bars, backwater channels and old-growth cottonwood forests support a range of unique, and sometimes endangered, plants and animals.

The MNRR provides a multitude of recreational opportunities, including numerous types of motorized and non-motorized boating, exceptional birding, fishing, biking, hiking, hunting, photography and artistic pursuits. Activities on the Missouri and Niobrara Rivers can range from highly challenging paddlefish archery to simply floating with the current.

Unlike many other NPS facilities, there is no official MNRR Visitor Center. Instead, information about the MNRR is available at several points along the river, at facilities operated by cooperating entities:

## Army Corps of Engineers Lewis and Clark Visitor Center

This visitor center (402-667-2546) includes exhibits and information on the Missouri National Recreational River. It is located on Calumet Bluff just downstream from the Gavins Point Dam in Nebraska. To get there take Nebraska Highway 121, about four miles west of Yankton, South Dakota. Hours of Operation: Open seven days a week: 9:00 AM to 5:00 PM during the warm season; Monday through Friday from 8:00 AM to 4:00 PM October through February. Closed on Federal holidays. Please call ahead as times may change.



Photos courtesy of the National Park Service



## Missouri National Recreational River Resource & Education Center

The building is located in Nebraska's Ponca State Park and houses a large exhibit wing featuring displays on the Wild and Scenic Missouri. It is open Monday through Saturday from 8:00 AM to 5:00 PM and on Sunday from 1:00 PM to 5:00 PM. Hours are extended during the summer. The state park is at the end of Highway Spur 26 E about three miles north of Ponca. A valid daily or annual entry permit is required. To learn more call: 402-755-2284.

## Mulberry Bend Overlook

With a great view of the 59-mile reach of the river, this overlook is on the Nebraska side by the Missouri River bridge connecting Vermillion, South Dakota, and Newcastle, Nebraska (SD 19 and Nebraska 15). It is open year-round and is closed only in winter when conditions warrant. Wayside exhibits at the parking area tell the story of the Lewis and Clark Expedition and the historic river. A short hike to the top affords a panoramic vista of the Wild and Scenic Missouri.

